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# THE PACIFIC HISTORIAN

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## Jack London's Scorn of Women: A Klondike Comedy's World Premiere

by Howard Lachtman

"I like exceedingly the way you've brought out the play *Scorn of Women*," Jack London wrote his publisher about his first published play. "It's a pretty little solid volume, and it makes me glad to look at it."

The thirty-year-old playwright would have been even gladder to see a production of his play, but leading actresses from Ethel Barrymore to Blanche Bates felt the title role wasn't quite right for their talents. The mercurial London soon lost interest and turned his energies to other things, including a voyage around the world.

But his 1906 comedy of romantic cross-purposes has not been forgotten. A spirited cast of young Mother Lode players, under the able direction of Amador drama teacher and impresario Marian Beilke, made theatrical history on the evening of April 26, 1979, when *Scorn of Women* had its world premiere. Set in the gold country of the Klondike, the three-act play debuted appropriately in the California gold country town of Jackson.

It was back in 1973 that Beilke and an earlier student cast successfully revived the London-Herbert Heron melodrama *Gold*. In 1979 Northern California audiences had their first opportunity to see a play which, according to Beilke, is probably the first full-length stage work about the Far North by an American author ever to be published.

Yet *Scorn of Women* was not London's first theatrical venture. In fact, he scored a San Francisco triumph when his one-act drama, *The Great Interrogation*, was presented at the old Alcazar Theatre at the end of August, 1905. The critics were encouraging, but the patrons were enthusiastic — their shouts for the author compelled the reluctant London to quit the seat up in the gallery where he was hiding and come down to the stage for a curtain call. Reporters at the scene noted that the short, burly playwright eschewed formal evening wear, flashed an elfin grin at his ovation, and made a modest speech which avoided self-congratulation.

*Scorn of Women* was London's attempt to cash in on his newly-won reputation as a Northland dramatist. For the story behind the story of this unusual play, we must travel back to Dawson, in Canada's Yukon Territory, just before the turn of the century. The discovery of gold-bearing ore along the tributaries of the Klondike River had set in motion an unparalleled drama of greed and ambition.





Women came too. London knew the likes of Diamond Tooth Lil, Klondike Kate, Oregon Mare, Swiftwater Sal, and other legendary ladies. But he had a soft spot in his heart for a clumsy belly dancer named Freda Molooof.

Jack wasn't the only man in town who admired Freda's free-spirited choreography. Miss Molooof billed herself as "The Turkish Whirlwind Danseuse," a name which was the sole refinement her torrid act could boast. She may have lacked the grace of "Little Egypt," the sensation of the 1890s, but according to one witness, "The Turkish Whirlwind in motion could knock Constantinople endwise."

The law in "lawless, goddess Dawson" sometimes winked at mayhem and murder, but when Queen Victoria's dismounted police caught Freda's act, they found it was not enough to melt all the snow in town. The Whirlwind was promptly closed down for the protection of community morals and sent packing, much to the sorrow of the entire male population.

Dawson might, in time, have forgotten all about Freda Molooof, but Jack London could not. Underneath her brazen exterior, Freda had a heart of pyrite, but there is evidence that she befriended the lonely and ailing young London when he needed it most.

The writer caught up with the dancer again in the summer of 1903, when *The Call of the Wild* was making him a national celebrity. Freda was past her prime, performing her famous "muscle dance" under the fake palms of tented sideshows and dreaming of going back to the gold country for a fresh start.

Since London himself was dreaming of making a fresh start in search of "stage gold" as a playwright, he had the notion of writing a play about his old friend Freda. She had already been immortalized in one of his short stories, "The Scorn of Women," in which Jack had transformed her into "a dazzlingly beautiful and very rich dancer, who is worshipped by all the men and suspected by all the women."

London's idea was to convert the tale into a play, engage the fictional Freda's formidable talents in close-quarter combat with several other Dawson women, and prove once again the eternal truth of Kipling's assertion that "never can battle of man compare with merciless feminine fray."

It seemed an easy thing to do, merely a matter of "adaptation and elaboration." But London soon found playwrighting to be harder sledding than the Chilkoot Pass.

"Oh, how it puzzles me and worries me, that play," he complained. "Sometimes all seems clear (and good) and next it seems all rot and a rotten failure. But I don't care. Though I never get a cent for it, I'm learning a whole lot about playwrighting."



# "THE SCORN OF WOMEN"

A Play in Three Acts

by JACK LONDON

Author of "The Call of the Wild," etc.

Presented by the Jackson High School Players

An hilarious drama replete with scandalously modern purport.

Directed by Marlan Beilke, Assistant Directors: Shelley Russell & Amy Liest

To be performed in the Old High School Auditorium

Jackson, California. Refreshments Available. Reserve tickets early!


Adults \$3.00 Students \$2.50

Curtain : 8:P.M. April 26, 27, 28 May 3, 4, 5



London's farce concerns the amorous adventures of Floyd Vanderlip, Klondike Bonanza King, who has already pledged his troth to Flossie, his stateside sweetheart. Flossie is coming up to the Klondike to be married and take up the duties of a Bonanza King's queen, but the problem is that her journey has a longer span than Floyd's powers of constancy. He soon falls into the clutches of Lorraine Lisznayi, a well-preserved but well-traveled international adventuress, whose European reputation has conveniently been left behind in Europe.

When it seems that the wily Madame Lisznayi will succeed in making wandering Floyd forget all about faithful Flossie, two other women of Dawson spring into action to rescue Floyd from his seducer and preserve him for his bride. These two "rescuers," unknown to one



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another, are Mrs. Eppingwell, the town paragon and soul of respectability, and Freda Moloo, the town scandal and soul of civic disrepute. Their skirmish animates this little classic of naive and nostalgic theatre.

The parallel efforts of the able-minded Mrs. Eppingwell and the able-bodied Freda soon run on a collision course, and that's when the fun begins. Romantic and strategic complications ensue, capped by a delightful "masked ball" scene and framed by the baffled comments of Sitka Charley, the play's "common man" and dupe. And there is genuine suspense in the final act as London teases his audience to guess just how far Freda will go to keep Floyd in her hands and out of Lisznay's arms.

Though neither a brisk nor polished play, *Scorn of Women* is consistently a play that entertains. In its lines, the lost wilderness of the Klondike and the magic world of Jack London come to life again.

London's characters have all the freshness and vitality of the frontier types whom he knew intimately from his own experience. In praise of strong women who make – and sometimes break – the rules of love, *Scorn of Women* also offers a revealing look at boom town mentality and frontier morality. But it is at its best when it portrays what occurs when the so-called weaker sex takes off its snow mittens and puts on boxing gloves.

This is a play about a man who has too many women in his life, and whose life has ceased to be his own. It is also a comedic demonstration, as London himself observed, that "the way of a man with a maid may be too wonderful to know, but the way of a woman with a man passeth all conception."

How women compete (and conquer) in a fiercely masculine world is the central fascination of this play. The other fascination is the playwright himself, for *Scorn of Women* preserves a robust sense of Jack London's personality and personal philosophy.

London was no stranger to feminine charms, no respecter of his era's social and sexual hypocrisies, and never one to let a laugh get away. In *Scorn of Women*, he mined a snowbound battle of the sexes for its richest comic ore.

And what of Freda Moloo? "I don't know where I will go next," that double-chinned danseuse told London shortly before she disappeared into oblivion, "but I have learned that Dawson is wide open again. If so, I might go back."

It is reassuring to think that the woman whom all red-blooded argonauts applauded and whom all "decent" women avoided made her way back to "the land of the long frost and the wolf howl," and so ended her days where she often lost her heart, once lost her act, and first met Jack London – in the Klondike.

# The Linn County Courthouse

## Cannon

by Glenn A. Blacklock

For seventy years the object rested under the water, sand, and gravel of Albany Oregon's Willamette River. A subject of discord during the new State's political strife at the very beginning of the Civil War, it had mysteriously disappeared. And, although they had not been involved in a hostile action, those responsible for the "thing's" demise, carried a heavy secret.

Oregonians, far from the War's battlefields, were eager to forget their own dissensions. In the following decades, the new people along the Willamette's banks were usually too busy to reflect long on the "idle stories" of an older generation.

Then, in January 1933, Merle Moench, the operator of dredging equipment for Albany Sand And Gravel Company, ran his giant bucket over a heavy object. It was the same impediment that had been snagging his cables for years. His equipment was capable of bringing in a ton of gravel at a time, but the cables tightened under an added strain; and when the load was dumped along the riverbank near the gravel hopper, he noticed a solid-looking cylinder protruding from the mound. He started to run his bucket out for a return trip to the bottom, but decided, instead, to investigate the find. Moench and a fellow employee dug away the gravel. What had started as another dreary January morning, took on new interest as they brushed the sand and silt from their discovery. It was a cannon, a very ancient looking piece.

George Berry, who managed the sand and gravel works for its owners, Robert Sellers and Jacob Lindquist, had known for some time that there was something heavy in mid-river.

The site of the company's operation and an old bridge that had spanned the river at that place, the almost forgotten cable ferry, and even the way in which the town's founders had laid out the town of Albany, were all, in separate reasonings, the result of natural phenomena. The juncture of the mighty Willamette and the rapid-flowing Calapooia constantly forming and reforming a large pool, a gravel bar was created downstream.

The Albany Sand And Gravel Company took advantage of the constantly replenished gravel supply, and built there a permanent riverbank dredge. George Berry and his crew knew of the old bridge that had been built in 1892 and replaced by a more modern one (still in use) four city blocks downstream. The 1892 pilings still jutted above the high

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The Law Court, Courthouse  
Cannon



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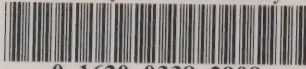

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